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Film Review: Aswang

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Abstract: A review of the 2019 documentary, *Aswang*, directed by Alyx Ayn Arumpac.

***Aswang* (2019, d. Alyx Ayn Arumpac). 84 minutes. Available for purchase and streaming on Vimeo. \$7.99.**

Alyx Ayn Arumpac's award-winning¹ first feature-length documentary, *Aswang* (2019), gains its title from the vampiric shapeshifter who stalks and preys on humans at night in traditional Filipino/a/x folklore. The film uses the mythic monster as a recurring metaphor for the contemporary "machinery of death"² (marked by extrajudicial killings) in the Philippines following President Rodrigo Duterte's violent anti-drug campaign. Initiated in 2016, the aim of the "war" on drugs is to execute suspected drug dealers, users, and other small-time criminals. The film's metaphorical system that links Filipino/a/x folklore to current regimes of state violence enables it to draw attention to the president's complicity in the growing phenomenon of unjust killings taking place primarily within poor communities. Focusing on Metro Manila's shanty-towns, the film guides its audience in seeing the interrelations between Duterte's administration and the vigilante killings and suspicious disappearances that have become everyday occurrences for the city's poorest inhabitants, who have been asymmetrically affected by these violences.

The significance of seeing and looking is established through the sequences of elegiac voiceover narration (provided by the director herself) that punctuate the film. As *Aswang*'s unseen narrator contemplates at the documentary's beginning, "[The aswang] kills anyone that dares to look back. And one must never look." Later, after the camera lingers on a scene of three slain bodies in the street, the narrator reflects, "What good are many eyes when they only look at the victim on the ground? People have been conditioned so well to look away from what they need to see." These various references to seeing help reveal the documentary's important, yet

difficult, political work; that is, enabling the viewer to see the very thing they have been “conditioned so well” to look away from: the state’s complicity in the recent phenomenon of extrajudicial killings. Without giving too much away, the film ends with an encouragement to its audience to “stand up and look the monster in the eye.”

These sequences of Alpumpac’s melancholic voiceover narration, frequently accompanied by gloomy and atmospheric visuals of the city, add texture to the documentary’s cinematic aesthetic. These voiceover segments draw from the techniques of essay film, an artistic filmmaking practice in which image and sound take on contemplative, essayistic qualities.³ It is in these brief forays into other cinematic modes beyond the standard mainstream documentary that *Aswang*’s ruminations on violence are especially striking. “Decay fills the air around us,” the narrator notes over shots of Metro Manila’s cityscape and traffic, bringing into focus the ways that the killing of civilians aligns with other forms of violence, like pollution and environmental degradation. She continues: “One can almost taste the metal. Not from the bullets, nor from the knives. But from the blood.” As the narrator speaks these lines, the rhythmic clanking of whips creeps into focus. The film then cuts to a particularly striking image: a group of masked self-flagellators whipping their bloodied backs in the street in penance. “They say this is how to ask for forgiveness,” the narrator comments. “But the aswang doesn’t listen to prayers. Such a monster does not forgive.” Arumpac’s elegiac narrations as well as the “startlingly extreme visuals”⁴ that accompany them build out *Aswang*’s dark, gritty depiction of Metro Manila as well as the film’s central metaphor linking folkloric monsters to contemporary atrocities; but they also introduce new spaces of thought by moving the documentary’s subject matter into the realm of the poetic and the lyrical.

These essayistic segments are moreover merely one aspect of *Aswang*'s complex and multifaceted visual language that draws from several filmmaking traditions at once. Much of the film employs observational fly-on-the-wall documentary methods that allow the audience to witness testimonies by those who have lost loved ones and enter spaces directly affected by Duterte's campaign. Several times throughout the film, we follow funeral home employees as they recover, prepare, and bury the bodies of people who have been recently murdered. In another segment of the film, Arumpac interviews an anonymous survivor of a police abduction. After the woman describes how she was imprisoned in a hidden cell concealed behind a cabinet in a precinct, the film takes us inside a "secret jail" where police officers kept kidnapped people, who were then held for ransom, tortured, and charged for uncommitted drug-related crimes. These sequences of quiet observation reveal the brutal extent that Duterte's administration has affected Metro Manila, and further, Philippine society more broadly.

Yet in a film that documents the harsh realities of Metro Manila's shanty-towns, the scenes that especially stand out are those more muted moments in which Arumpac employs her fly-on-the-wall techniques to take us through the ordinary activities of life within these communities. While the film includes testimonies from an array of sources who have been affected by the "war" on drugs (including local activists, family members of murder victims, survivors of abductions, and even a few drug-users), we spend much of the runtime with Jomari. Appearing somewhere between five and seven years of age, the young boy has been particularly affected by Duterte's violent campaign: both of his parents are in prison for using drugs, leaving him to fend for himself; and when Arumpac first meets him (seemingly by chance) at the film's beginning, he is attending a wake for his "only friend," Kian, who had recently been murdered by vigilantes. Although Jomari's testimonies speak to the difficulties of life within Metro

Manila's poorest neighborhoods, the most memorable moments are those in which we quietly watch him candidly live his everyday life: playing with his neighborhood friends, dreaming of being a grown-up, and spending time with his mother once she is released from prison. During one interview, he asks Arumpac (who remains behind the camera) for money to purchase slippers. This initiates a sequence in which we follow him into street shops as he picks clothes (which the director buys for him) to wear to visit his mother while she is still in jail. As we follow him through his ordinary activities, he becomes our guide through a city that has otherwise been visually rendered a nightmarish "killing field" where "not even children are spared." Jomari stands in for the countless poverty-stricken youths whose lives have been irrevocably affected by the Duterte administration, and whose stories go untold; and in a film that continually metaphorizes state violence as a boogeyman-like monster who strikes fear in children, Jomari's consistently optimistic and playful attitude amid abandonment and loss is a striking counterpoint to the rest of the documentary.

Arumpac's *Aswang* is a visually stunning and haunting meditation on how Duterte's government has affected some of the poorest members of Philippine society, with a primary focus on Metro Manila's shanty-town neighborhoods. While some scenes may be difficult to watch for their unwavering looks into the aftermath of extrajudicial killings and unflinching descriptions of torture and death, the documentary is certainly necessary viewing for those interested in current Philippine politics.

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Notes

1. The film won the FIPRESCI Award from the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) during its premiere at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA).
2. I borrow this phrase from the film's description on Vimeo.
3. The essay film as a filmic practice is quite expansive, and thus, difficult to describe concisely. See Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan's edited collection, *Essays on the Essay Film*, for more thorough discussions of the essay film's histories.
4. I borrow this phrase from Neil Young's review of the film for *The Hollywood Reporter*.